

Benefits and Challenges of Online Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused abrupt and profound changes around the world, especially to education systems in decades (World Bank, 2021). Schools have been exploring different ways to deliver instructions, and online teaching and learning has been commonly utilized method. Online instruction has made it convenient to establish collaborative learning with various universities. One pedagogical benefit of online collaborative learning is that it encourages students to discuss information and problems from different perspectives, and to elaborate and refine their understanding to re-and co-construct (new) knowledge or to solve a problem (Knopf et al., 2021). Other benefits include enriched social learning, extended time to reflect and structure thoughts before communicating the ideas; more time to check course readings or other sources of information; more in depth discussion, and more access to different perspectives on the same issue. Online collaboration learning has also some challenges, which include greater instances of communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and difficulty moving forward, and a lack of sense of community. The goal of our research is to report the feedback, specifically the benefits and challenges, of our students from the two private universities in Japan about the asynchronous online class collaboration. These benefits and challenges, which can give insights to other EFL teachers and administrators, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, collaborative learning (CL) has emerged as a new approach to thinking and learning due to the digital age having widely opened doors for communication using the Internet (Harasim, 2012). However, since the 1970s, CL has long been practiced as a teaching methodology (Kern, 2000), particularly in teacher education (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008; Shonfeld & Weinberger, 2019). During the

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pandemic, the need for global information sharing boosted online learning and teaching methods resulting in the progression of online collaborations.

Online collaboration is highly evident in education and all government and private institutions functions. As computer networks become a lifelong necessity in global communication, online collaboration learning (OCL) is envisioned to proliferate and remain in the educational systems. In Japan, the online community of educators, like Online Teaching Japan (OTJ), keeps thriving even after the pandemic and continues to catch up on the advancement of computer use and global communications networks and technology, indicating that digitally knowledgeable teachers find OCL a useful teaching method (Shonfeld & Gibson, 2019).

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines *collaboration* as "the act of working together with other people or organizations to create or achieve something," and the Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines *online* as "an activity done using an internet or computer network or a person connected or able to connect to the Internet." Johnson and Johnson (1987) describe collaboration as work performed together by group members to achieve a common goal, and members expect results beneficial for each of them. In this research, the teacher-collaborators adapted the definition of *online collaboration* as "classes from two private universities asynchronously working together, to engage in teaching and learning tasks, in order to achieve beneficial results that reinforce teaching and learning using the internet as a channel for exchange of communication."

Collaborative learning and teaching occur when students and teachers learn together to solve problems to reach a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The classes from the two private universities worked on research-oriented tasks during the online collaboration to develop research themes. They worked together within their respective universities and communicated through exchanged video messages via computer networks—Flipgrid and Jamboard.

Flipgrid is a free online application which allows teachers and students to create a grid about a specific topic and encourages peers and even people from around the world to record a short video about the topic (Johnson & Skarphol, 2018). It allows learners of all ages to find their voices, share their voices, and respect the diverse voices of others. Other benefits of Flipgrid includes building and strengthening students' social learning communities as they discuss their ideas and experiences with their peers, and amplifies their voice and

supports their development of global empathy as they immerse themselves in each other's learning processes and perspectives. Jamboard, which is available on any device that runs Android or iOS, such as a phone, a tablet, or an Android-enabled Chromebook, is a collaborative whiteboard used to create and edit content with other users, and can easily be shared with students to have access during and after class. (OIT Service Center, 2022). Jamboard can build students' communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. Students can use it for group brainstorming and developing new ideas. With teacher's guidance, students can engage in problem-solving exercises.

In the process of completing the task, members provided mentorship and buddy system relationships. The teachers' contemporary roles were facilitators and guided to connect students' knowledge. Kern (2000) explained that in collaboration, responsibility is shared between students and teachers. The teacher is there to organize, motivate, assist, and provide feedback, but students must play active roles with sizeable self-motivation, self-direction, and self-cooperation. Positive changes are likely to develop in learning and teaching habits during the unfolding of events in the learning and teaching process. Magen-Nagar (2019) reported that OCL impacts intrinsic motivation and attitudes toward technology. The inclination to adopt advanced technology can improve self-confidence and reduce anxiety. Furthermore, online collaborative programs can contribute to learners' self-efficacy and sense of autonomy. Hence, online collaboration can lead to a broader exchange of knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, and revolutions in pedagogical strategies. This research highlights learners' feedback from the two private universities and discusses the benefits and challenges of online collaboration, which can give insights to other EFL teachers and administrators.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online Collaborative Learning (OCL): modes, benefits, and challenges

During the pandemic, online collaborative learning is adapted in the classroom via asynchronous or synchronous modes (Hoter, 2019). In asynchronous mode, collaboration does not happen in real time. The process allows participants to take the time to read, monitor, and respond to the messages in the given time frame. The dominating language skills used are reading and writing. However, in the brainstorming process, students can harness their critical thinking skills while fostering their speaking skills. In addition, computer

literacy and speaking can be nurtured through video creation and using of computer networks. The disadvantage of the asynchronous mode is that some students need immediate feedback. Thus, waiting time sometimes results in frustration and hampers the spontaneity of distance communication (Lee, 1999 in Hoter, 2019).

In synchronous mode, communication happens in real-time. In the process, instructors and learners meet virtually on an appointed schedule. Consequently, learners are exposed to varied linguistic features and become familiarized with other learners' communication styles or linguistic strategies (Ko, 1996). However, as everyone is not highly computer literate, thinking and writing in the target language under pressure can result in simplified texts, resulting in broken constructs and incomplete meaning (Ko, 1996).

OCL can modify the traditional classroom discourse structures, allowing some learners a more significant opportunity to communicate and simultaneously providing alternative strategies to exploit their learning. At the same time, as written communications are recursive, learners can repeatedly read what they have written, facilitating reflections during and after writing and contributing to learners' metacognitive awareness. Research revealed that when learners read what others have written, it has positive effects on specific knowledge and collaborative skills (Vogel, F., Wecker, C., Kollar, I., *et al.* 2017).

OCL is known to foster the development of socio-cognitive literacy. Through instructional and peer support, scaffolding can guide interaction processes. OCL also allows learners to have ongoing contact with geographically-distant learners to form learning communities within local and national boundaries. Negotiating meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries exercises learners' communication skills and can enrich their knowledge of the other's culture.

Although technology enhances teaching and learning (Rutherford, 2010), Keengewe, Onchwari & Wachira (2008) argued that using technology in education can be complicated as it is necessary to consider content, delivery, and use of devices. During the pandemic, learners received access to gadgets on school premises, but not everyone had access to the Internet in their own living space. In OCL, assessment is also challenging for instructors and students. Meijer et al. (2020) reported that assessing students' output in groups, team-based projects, and a combination of peer and group work takes work. The report suggested that it is crucial to conform to collaboration features — individual responsibility and positive interdependence when

designing collaborative assessments. Kern (2000) emphasized that from a Vygotskian viewpoint, it is vital to consider what students can accomplish. Thus, providing a variety of assessment contexts, such as some individual and some collaborative, will help learners tap their abilities. In addition, studies also revealed that although learners are motivated with OCL, challenges such as poor motivation, lack of individual accountability, and negative interdependence are predominant (Liu et al., 2010; Capdeferro, N., & Romero, M., 2012).

Collaborative Learning vs. Cooperative Learning

Collaboration is often associated with cooperation and is interchangeably used as they are complementary (Finkbeiner, 2003); however, they are not precisely the same. As a pedagogical method, collaborative learning involves learning in groups, regardless of age, or grade level, to achieve a common goal, such as solving a problem, completing a task, or collaborating on a project (Brody & Davidson, 1998 in Shonfeld & Weinberger, 2019). Theoretically, collaborative learning focuses on positive interdependence and relies heavily on members' dialogue and interactions (Hung and Chen, 2001, in Shonfeld & Weinberger, 2019). In cooperative learning, the focus is on learners working together toward a common goal but not necessarily interdependently. Both collaborative and cooperative learning theories were influenced by the theory of social constructivism in education (Davidson & Major, 2014).

Online Collaboration in Higher Education

Recently, OCL has been increasing in higher education (Waldman & Harel, 2019) as technologies are required (Lambert et al., 2014). Schools have been promoting the development of problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaborative thinking skills in digital competencies as they have become fundamental skills in the 21st century (Hendarwati, E., Nurlaela, L., & Bachri, B.S., 2021). However, collaborative teaching environments and collaborative teaching and learning have yet to be put into full practice. According to Amirault (2012), implementing online university programs means immense organizational and pedagogical adjustments in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, OCL is considered integral in teaching and learning in the 21st century (Resta & Carrol, 2010) and must be experienced by teacher-training colleges and universities. Educators who experienced online collaboration reported they could learn and adapt OCL to use with their students (Waldman & Harel, 2019). Unconventional educators who employ OCL in their curriculum highly

recommend using collaborative technologies in higher education and therefore be updated with the latest technology. With the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Japanese primary schools, future teachers are highly encouraged to develop online expertise to be highly prepared for the employment of computer network tools that are most likely getting more advanced.

PARTICIPANTS

16 students from two private universities were the subjects of the study. The major of the students from one private university is Global Communications, while it is Education in the other private university. The eight students, who major in Global Communications, are second year, while those who major in Education are third year. Both groups of students were studying basic research, which was also the focus of the online research class collaboration. Topics included deciding research topic, narrowing research topic, and formulating thesis statement. Only 10 participants answered the survey questionnaire.

INSTRUMENTATION

To offer respondents an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers, a survey questionnaire with two-open ended questions, was utilized in the study. One question asked the participants to write about the benefits of online class collaboration, and the other question asked about the challenges they have encountered. Orientation between the two professors about the importance of online collaboration and how Jamboard and Flipgrid worked was held on Zoom. Participants were required to post weekly a recorded video about the topic. Flipgrid was used to record and post the video, while Jamboard was utilized to brainstorm and make an outline about the topic for the video recording. Orientation and practice about how to use Flipgrid and Jamboard were held by each class from each university.

Zoom meetings, exchanges of E-mail messages and messages through Facebook Messenger between the two teachers from the two universities about how to use the two applications, the details of the online class collaboration, which included weekly topic to cover, the deadline of the posting, and the struggles of the students, were held.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Benefits of Online Class Collaboration

Learned more through the Internet
Helped improve English
Broadened knowledge from other's opinions
Learned from various students
Found Jamboard convenient
Brought Seminar classes together
Allowed the making of introduction video

One of the benefits of online class collaboration cited by the students was learning more through the Internet. Students had to search about their research topic using the Internet. There are two possible reasons, which encouraged students to learn more through the Internet. One was to prepare for their video posting. Since other students would be reading their posting through a recorded video, they had to prepare more by searching on the Internet about their topic to make sure the content was good. The other possible reason why students learned more through the Internet might be that the use of computer and information technology, such as Jamboard and Flipgrid, provided them more opportunities and motivated them to search more about their topic using the Internet. The computer and learning applications, such as Jamboard and Flipgrid, were required of them to accomplish the tasks. Results revealed that the participants found the use of applications to be convenient, specifically Jamboard. As OIT Service Center (2022) explains, Jamboard can easily be shared with students to have access during and after class.

The other benefit was the online class collaboration helped improve their English. Although the collaboration did not happen in real time in asynchronous mode, the process allowed participants to take the time to read, monitor, and respond to the messages in the given time frame (Hoter, 2019). Furthermore, Hoter explained that the dominating language skills used are reading and writing. Written communications are recursive, and learners can repeatedly read what they have written, facilitating reflections during and after writing and contributing to learners' metacognitive awareness. Research revealed that when learners read what others have written, it has positive effects on specific knowledge and collaborative skills (Vogel, F., Wecker,

C., Kollar, I., et al. 2017). Specifically, Flipgrid gave students the opportunity to make an introduction video about themselves as well as other topics. While they were preparing for their postings by searching information related to their topics mostly on the Internet, they were learning English. They were also learning English when they viewed and gave feedback in English to the postings of other students from another university. They did not only learn English, but also they broadened their knowledge from other's opinions, specifically by learning from various students in other university.

Finally, the online class collaboration brought the two seminar classes together. Collaborative learning and teaching occur when students and teachers learn together to solve problems to reach a deeper understanding of the subject matter, which was implemented between the two seminar classes from the two universities. Using Flipgrid and Jamboard, the two classes worked on research-oriented tasks during the online collaboration to develop research themes and other research related topics.

Table 2

Challenges of Online Class Collaboration

Be clear about what to do
I don't feel like writing interesting titles
There was a difference in enthusiasm between schools
Create opportunities for students to come into contact with each other more voluntarily
Differences in awareness of collaboration among universities
There wasn't much to do except improve my own English skills. It would be nice if there was someone similar to my research
Could not confirm what the speaker meant by just watching the recorded video
Video recordings created emotional distance

One challenge cited by two students was to be clear about what to do. It was the first time for the two classes to collaborate and the first time to use Jamboard and Flipgrid for the online class collaboration, which resulted in many challenges, such as forgetting how to use the two applications. There was also an issue of one or two students missing the classes, therefore missing the lessons, for example, lessons about the technical aspects of Jamboard and Flipgrid and how to formulate a research topic. These concerns possibly negatively affected the class plans, including the giving of clear instructions about the activities. This in turn resulted in students not motivated to write interesting titles or topics. It was also possible that these unclear instructions

and differences in awareness of collaboration between the two universities were the reason for one seminar group to have a different enthusiasm for the online class collaboration. Sowell (2017) argued that instruction-giving has a direct effect on learning. A lesson or activity becomes chaotic and fails when students do not understand what they are supposed to do. Nonetheless, good instruction-giving is a challenge for both native and nonnative language teachers, as well as for both seasoned and novice teachers, especially when the instructions are about a new teaching-learning technique, such as the utilization of Flipgrid and Jamboard in an online class collaboration in this study. Although technology enhances teaching and learning (Rutherford, 2010), such as Flipgrid and Jamboard in this study, Keengewe, Onchwari and Wachira (2008) emphasized that using technology in education can be complicated as it is necessary to consider content, delivery, and use of devices.

Another challenge mentioned was there were times when the content was not substantial, so it was difficult to respond. Students from one university were required to give feedback to the video posting of students from another university, so the kind of reaction or feedback would depend on the content of the posting. This means that if the content of the video posting is substantial, students can write more feedback.

Video recordings created emotional distance and to create opportunities for students to come into contact with each other more voluntarily are another two related challenges of online class collaboration. Students felt that the video recordings created emotional distance between and among students from the two universities, so there was a need to create opportunities for them to come into contact with each other more voluntarily. Online collaborative learning (OCL) is known to foster the development of socio-cognitive literacy. Through instructional and peer support, scaffolding can guide interaction processes. OCL also allows learners to have ongoing contact with geographically-distant learners to form learning communities within local and national boundaries. However, the data showed otherwise.

Another student wrote that there was not much to do except to improve my own English skills was another challenge of online class collaboration, and that it would be nice if there was someone similar to his/her research. Students should understand that aside from improving one's English skills, utilizing online class collaboration, Flipgrid and Jamboard have other benefits. Asynchronous collaboration allows participants to take the time to read, monitor, and respond to the messages in the given time frame. When

learners read what others have written, it has positive effects on specific knowledge and collaborative skills (Vogel, F., Wecker, C., Kollar, I., *et al.* 2017). It also provides opportunities for participants to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries exercises their communication skills and can enrich their knowledge of the other's culture. It seems that these benefits were not clearly explained to them, or these were not achieved in the class.

Finally, a student cited that he or she could not confirm what the speaker meant by just watching the recorded video. Confirmation is possible by posting questions or clarifications. Posting questions related to the topic, such as clarifying about what the speaker means should be included in the clear instructions. Teacher should show some sample feedback/postings to familiarize students with what to do.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it convenient to establish online collaborative learning with the two research seminar classes from the two private universities. The online collaboration resulted in as many benefits as challenges. Teacher's mastery of how to use the two online applications, namely Flipgrid and Jamboard is a very important contributor for the success of the online class collaboration. Clear learning goals and instruction-giving about the learning tasks to the students is equally important for its successful implementation.

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【抄 録】

COVID-19 パンデミックは、世界中の教育システムにここ数十年ない急激かつ深刻な変化をもたらした (World Bank, 2021)。学校は異なる指導方法を模索し、オンライン授業が一般的に使用されている。オンライン授業は、様々な大学と協同学習を確立するのに便利である。オンライン協同学習の教育的恩恵の1つは、学生が異なる視点から情報や問題を議論し、自分達の理解を詳細に説明して洗練させ、(新しい)知識の再構築と共同構築あるいは問題解決を促すことにある (Knopf et al., 2021)。他の利点としては、充実した社会学習、意見を述べる前に熟考し考えをまとめる時間の延長、授業での読み物や他の情報源を確認する時間の増加、より詳細な議論、同じ問題に対する異なる視点へのアクセスの増加があげられる。一方で、オンライン協同学習には、意志疎通の断絶、誤解、前進の困難さ、共同体意識の欠如などの例が多くみられるなどの課題もある。本研究の目的は、日本の2つの私立大学の学生からの非同期オンライン協同学習に関するフィードバック、具体的には利点と課題を報告することにある。他のEFL教員や管理者に洞察を与えることができるこれらの利点と課題を考察する。

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